

## National student evaluation research

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# Student Evaluation Seed Project

## Executive Summary

### Issues, Context & Project Aims

Online student evaluation systems are an opportunity for student engagement and learning improvement. However, they are currently limited by low response rates. Educators tend not to trust them and students describe the activity of filling in multiple surveys as futile. Student feedback processes have largely become academic performance review instruments rather than evaluation and change catalysts. However, there are universities successfully using student evaluation to measure student course engagement and learning development, and then involving students in improving the overall student experience. This completed OLT Seed project was designed to fully develop six such innovations into case studies. The project pursued the questions: How can we measure student engagement and learning success using student evaluation processes? And how can students contribute to on-going improvement in university learning and teaching? The team drew-out a cohesive set of key issues, strategies and recommendations, and disseminated these through a symposium and a website. <http://highereducationstudentevaluation.com> The aims of this project were to describe and disseminate Australian case studies of effective systems, approaches and strategies used to measure and improve student course engagement and learning success through the use of online student evaluation systems. The six institution project partners have developed innovations. This project aimed and accomplished dissemination of these and additional strategies to the sector.

The following definition has emerged out of the project teams' analysis of interviews and focus groups. Student Evaluation of Courses and Teaching (SECT) is the collection, analysis, reporting and application of feedback from students about the design, facilitation and quality of the education experience. The most common means of data collection is through online surveys distributed near the end of the teaching semester or conclusion of a degree.

The **project approach** was conducted in three phases.

**Phase one – case study development:** The project team: interviewed and conducted focus groups with students, academics, professional staff responsible for administering student evaluation and senior executives such as DVCs (n=97); collected and analysed documents such as surveys and reports; observed practise, asked questions and recorded field notes.

**Phase two – deriving recommendations from case studies:** Second, Project Team Members from each of the six universities collaborated (online) to draw-out a cohesive set of key issues, strategies and recommendations from the Phase One case studies.

**Phase three – dissemination through a student evaluation seminar:** This phase focussed on dissemination, including a report (print and online) and a symposium for sharing student evaluation good practice and recommendations. Seventy-five delegates attended.



## **Overall Results / Key Findings**

**How can we measure student engagement and learning success using student evaluation processes?** Project participants explained that as a stand-alone process, student evaluation does not yield valid data to measure student engagement and learning success. However, when student evaluation data is strategically integrated with a full suite of other quality assurance tools, processes and data-bases, student survey responses are a rich and informative means of evaluating the effectiveness of higher education.

### **How can students contribute to on-going improvement in university learning and teaching?**

A salient theme across interviews and focus groups was that student evaluation surveys are part of a suite of quality assurance tools through which students can contribute to on-going improvement in university learning and teaching.

**Overall sentiment towards the student evaluation process** Student project participants were neutral to positive about student evaluation (SE). Most student responses indicated an acceptance that the SE process was necessary and potentially useful, albeit for future semesters of students. Academic project participants were accepting of the role of SE in the educational experience, acknowledging that SE is a standard process across universities. Professional staff conceptualised students as *evaluators* as opposed to only survey *respondents*. They said that students should be consulted, included and informed. Project participants from the senior executive stakeholder group expressed positive sentiment towards SE, stating that the system enables the student voice.

### **Strengths and needed improvements to the student evaluation process**

Project participants perceived three main strengths of student evaluation processes at partner institutions: online administration means that the systems are automated, accessible, user-friendly, convenient and environmental; the process results in meaningful data allowing change and improvement; and universities administer frequent/standard surveys such that historic evaluation is possible. The main need for improvement was that survey questions need refining as some are vague, confusing and/or ambiguous.

## **Project Outcomes/Deliverables**

The Project identified effective online student evaluation systems in Australia and developed case studies, strategies and recommendations for dissemination to the higher education sector. As proposed, the project outcomes included:

1. Development of case studies at each of the partner institutions, regarding effective online student evaluation systems;
2. Identification of the key issues, strategies and recommendations for measuring and improving student course engagement and learning success through online student evaluation systems; and
3. Dissemination via a student evaluation symposium (75 delegates), an emerging community of practice and conference presentations/papers (6) accessible through a website <http://highereducationstudentevaluation.com>

## **Recommendations for improving student evaluation**

### **Survey timing and accessibility**

- Leave surveys open as long as possible including during exam block.
- Provide an additional digital drop-box whereby students can submit feedback as it occurs to them.

- Consider moving beyond a sole summative measure of satisfaction by asking students at the start of the semester to outline their expectations and then evaluate at end.
- Design surveys to be as user-friendly as possible, such as by designing them to feel like apps whereby the student clicks on a rating circle.

### **Survey design**

- Use as few surveys as possible.
- Include as few questions as possible.
- Provide room for extensive free text.
- Allow the students the option of responding to some or all questions.
- Ask questions about courses and programs in addition to subjects or units.

### **Provide the opportunity for additional feedback**

- Include a survey space for students to insert their name and contact information if they wish to provide additional verbal feedback.
- Include a survey space for students to insert their name and contact information if they wish to be contacted to talk about their own learning and/or progress.
- Insert a line in the survey stating, “If you have any problems or concerns you are also welcome to contact me [insert teacher’s name] directly and I will see what I can do.”

### **Engage in conversations**

- Teachers are encouraged to discuss the importance of student evaluation with students.
- Do not rely on surveys as the sole source of evaluation.
- Senior executives are encouraged to visit classes periodically to ask students for their opinions on educational matters.
- Schedule focus groups.
- Engage class representatives.

### **Refine reports and improve reporting**

- If using the mean score on Likert-scale items, also provide the median and/or mode.
- Email students a link to the overall student evaluation results.
- Present ‘this is what I am going to change for next year from your feedback.’
- At the beginning of the semester review results from prior surveys and action taken.
- Facilitate feedback sessions with student cohorts.

### **Provide professional development**

- Teach students how to write appropriate, professional, constructive feedback.
- Provide workshops for academics on how to interpret and take appropriate action.

### **Provide an opportunity for academics to respond and/or rebut**

- Formalise a process for academics to respond to student feedback.
- Provide an opportunity for appeal if student evaluation feedback is perceived as inaccurate and/or unfair.